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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of high-profile intercollegiate athletic programs, such as men's football and basketball, in institutional identity. Site visits were conducted at 11 universities in the United States with nationally recognized intercollegiate athletic programs, and a total of 177 formal interviews were conducted with administrators, faculty, and students. An equivalent number of informal interviews were also conducted with faculty, students, and lower-level staff. An analysis of the interview data found that a high-profile college sports program is perceived by external constituents to be something distinctive, central, and enduring about the institution, as well as something that is viewed favorably by others. Both outcomes enhance institutional identification, causing people to: (1) be drawn to the campus, both literally and figuratively; (2) come to know something about the institution, often something positive; and (3) think of the institution in conjunction with the universities against whom the athletics teams commonly compete. (Contains 97 references.) (MDM)

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ED 420 220

Representing the University: The Uses of Intercollegiate Athletics in Enhancing Institutional Identity

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Introduction and Significance

Colleges and universities devote substantial resources to the concurrent tasks of constructing a positive institutional identity and raising their external profile. Capturing the attention of important outside audiences -- major donors and annual fund contributors; legislative appropriation committees and tax-paying citizens; prospective students and tuition-paying parents -- is often difficult. Nevertheless, it is necessary if the university is to portray itself as worthy of support from these off-campus constituents.

One aspect of the university that often does garner significant notice is on-campus spectator sports, particularly the marquee football and men's basketball programs at large institutions. These are the teams that generate and receive so much of the attention and revenue associated with intercollegiate athletics. Spectator sports are commonly portrayed as the front door to the university; they are what many people on the outside see and what eventually gets them inside. Especially at larger institutions, these sports are entertainment spectaculars that build and fill enormous stadia and arenas; entice television networks to broadcast games to eager national audiences; and attract hundreds of national and local journalists to campus on game day.

The magnitude of these events not only contributes an aura of importance to the campus, but they are the aspect of the university that is most visible to those outside of the academic community. The marquee sports have evolved into *the* key point of reference to the university for many important audiences, an outcome that the university has fostered through its uses of college sports in campus life and external relations. High-profile sports assume an often substantial role in the personal identity of a sizable group of external constituents who associate with the institution primarily -- if not exclusively -- through teams and games. The often intense institutional identification that results from engagement with spectator sports provides the university with a powerful tool in enhancing external support. At institutions with high-profile teams, administrators involved in external relations -- admissions, advancement, alumni relations, community affairs, development,

governmental relations -- orchestrate through college sports the involvement in campus life by key constituents that is so important in advancing various institutional ends.

Research Question and Boundaries

I explore the intersections between high-profile college sports and how institutions portray themselves to external constituents. My baseline contention is that college sports are significant in defining the essence of the American college and university. Higher education in the United States has never been just about the classroom or laboratory, but has embodied a romanticized collegiate ideal in which academic endeavors coexist with the pursuit of campus community through customs and rituals, events and activities, and residence life and recreational facilities. Particularly at institutions with a substantial number of full-time, traditional-aged students -- like most flagship state universities and large private institutions -- institutional life is often as much about student activities and residence life as it is about the production and dissemination of knowledge. On larger campuses, football and basketball games serve as a surrogate for the more intimate community-building activities traditionally found on smaller residential campuses that are the basis of the collegiate ideal. Moreover, college sports have particular meaning as conveyors of custom and tradition.

At the turn of the last century, when some American colleges became universities -- grafting the European foci on research and graduate education onto the idea of the residential campus imported from Oxford and Cambridge -- we did not adopt the European concept of a university being merely a faculty within academic building. At the same time, financial support for American higher education remained primarily a local matter. As a result, Americans continue to relate to higher education institutions on a very personal level. Our conceptualization of the university is both as a community itself and as part of a broader community. Not only do colleges and universities assume a place of great significance in the professional lives of students, faculty, and administrators, but institutions are important in their personal lives as well. Meanwhile, there is an often intense civic engagement with institutions and institutional life. Local external constituents provide institutions with needed

financial support. In exchange, institutions provide a touchstone for the surrounding community.

What results from our definition of the university as both a community itself and as of the broader community is a pronounced identification with and affinity for institutions by both internal and external constituents. In Nebraska, for instance, citizens support the state university in Lincoln through their tax dollars and their civic pride and that institution becomes part of who they are as Nebraskans (particularly on Saturday afternoons in the Fall). As members of broadly-defined university communities, both those on- and off-campus assume a personal and intense investment in something perceived to be significant. In short, institutions become part of our individual and collective identities.

Spectator sports provide a bridge between external constituents and the collegiate ideal. Football and basketball teams and games are essentially how many external constituents directly experience the university. Intercollegiate athletics not only entertain many of the external constituents who are so important in maintaining the university, but also involve them in institutional life in a way that is meaningful to them. If we are to understand our largest and most prominent universities, we must ask how on-campus spectator sports -- particularly high-profile sports of football and men's basketball -- coincide with the identities that institutions construct for themselves and the identities that individuals derive from their institutional affiliations.

I focus upon the high-profile intercollegiate athletics at large universities that are the exception rather than the rule across the whole of American higher education. Most participation in intercollegiate sports occurs with little fanfare. Except for the so-called revenue-producing marquee sports, varsity teams in non-revenue sports at larger schools typically receive little attention, even though they account for the bulk of participation at the varsity level. At the smaller colleges that represent most of the participation in intercollegiate sports overall, the situation parallels the typical non-revenue sport at a larger school. None of this is to say that college sports are not meaningful to campus communities at smaller schools or that non-revenue sports are not important at larger universities,

particularly for the student-athletes who compete in them. The difference is in scope. At State U., football and basketball are a regional and national phenomenon, not merely a campus or local one. Small college and non-revenue college sports are rarely the window to understanding the campus that the marquee sports are at the flagship state or large private universities on which I focus.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Some research has directly addressed the intersections between college sports and external relations. One line of scholarly work has attempted to connect participation by institutions in high-profile intercollegiate athletics with institutional advancement activities, particularly fundraising (Grimes and Cressanthis, 1994; Sigelman and Bookheimer, 1993; Bergmann, 1991; Coughlin and Erekson, 1985; Sack and Watkins, 1985; Coughlin and Erekson, 1984; Brooker and Klastorin, 1981; Sigelman and Carter, 1979; Marts, 1934). However, findings are mixed about whether college sports has a meaningful impact on advancement. Other research has explored whether an institutional presence in college sports influences the recruitment of undergraduate students (Toma and Cross, 1996; Sigelman, 1995; Mixon and Ressler, 1995; Mixon and Hsing, 1994; Murphy and Trandel, 1994; Cressanthis and Grimes, 1993; Tucker and Amato, 1993; McCormick and Tinsley, 1987). Once again, the findings of these studies are inconclusive.

Scholarship on intercollegiate athletics in general usually focuses on scandal and reform (Lapchick, 1996; Byers, 1995; Frey, 1994; Lapchick and Slaughter, 1994; Andre and James, 1991; Bailey and Littleton, 1991; Sack, 1991; Shropshire, 1991; Sperber, 1991; Cullen, Latessa, and Byrne, 1990; Roberts and Olson, 1989; Thelin and Wiseman, 1989). Other academic writing centers on the history of college sports (Lester, 1995; Guttmann, 1991; Smith, 1990). Thelin (1994) combines these two themes in his illuminating recent book. Recent academic work on intercollegiate athletics has also addressed the student-athlete (Alexander, 1996; Adler and Adler, 1991) and the economics of sport (Euchner, 1993; Fleisher, Goff and Tollison, 1992).

In addition, work on the social significance of sport contributes to our understanding of how intercollegiate athletics contribute to institutional profile, but rarely does it focus directly on the topic (Danielson, 1997; Eitzen and Sage, 1997; Higgs, 1995; Raitz, 1995; Real and Mechikoff, 1992; Cashmore, 1990; Foley, 1990; Riess, 1990; Sage, 1990; Chu, 1985; Cialdini, et. al., 1976). Similarly, researchers in higher education have explored institutional culture (Kuh, 1993; Manning, 1993; Peterson and Spencer, 1993; Berquist, 1992; Kuh and Whitt, 1988; Tierney, 1988; Cameron and Ettington, 1988), but typically have not concentrated on understanding the contributions of intercollegiate athletics to that culture. The same is true of the well-developed scholarly literature on organizational theory (Bolman and Deal, 1997; Morgan, 1996; Weick, 1995; Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Morgan and Pondy, 1983; Morgan, 1983; Mayer and Scott, 1981), organizational culture (Alasuutari, 1995; Louis, 1993; Martin, 1992; Schein, 1991; Frost, et. al, 1985; Trice and Bayer, 1984;), organizational symbolism (Grant and Oswick, 1996; Jeffcut, 1994; Fineman, 1993; Alvesson, 1991), and organizational identity (Czarniawska, 1997; Hall and DuGay, 1996; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Diamond, 1988). Finally, writing on external relations, particularly on fundraising and advancement, is also somewhat instructive (Harcleroad, 1994; Duronio and Loessin, 1990; Grace and Leslie, 1990).

The work of Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) on organizational identification provides a conceptual framework for the study. In their model, the strength of the positive connections that people form with organizations are a factor of:

- the attractiveness of what they perceived to be distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization; and
- the degree to which they believe others view the organization favorably.

Perceived organizational identity and construed external image are positively influenced by the level of contact that one has with the organization and the visibility of his or her organizational affiliation (Mael and Tetrick, 1993; Sutton and Harrison, 1993; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991).

Cases and Method

In order to explore these ideas and theories, I visited eleven campuses that are representative of the different types of universities that make a substantial institutional commitment to intercollegiate athletics:

University of Arizona
Brigham Young University
Clemson University
University of Connecticut
Louisiana State University
University of Michigan
Northwestern University
University of Nebraska
University of Notre Dame
University of Nevada-Las Vegas
Texas A&M University

I used purposive sampling to select these cases in an attempt to best represent the diversity in the types of institutions that share an intense emotional and financial investment in college sports, but that are different in several respects (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Kuzel, 1992, Morris, 1989). The cases include schools with different institutional characteristics:

- locations (including each region of the country, different sized cities and towns, near populations centers and not);
- types of students (namely numbers of students enrolled, proportions of in-state and out-of-state students, average SAT score and GPA for incoming students);
- degrees of research focus; and
- campus cultures and traditions.

(See Appendix A for further elaboration.) The cases also included different characteristics in intercollegiate athletics:

- athletics department size and scope (measured by number of athletes, number of sports, and athletic department budget);
- athletic conference affiliation (each of the eight major conferences is represented);

- recent and traditional success in intercollegiate athletics;
- degrees of media coverage and other exposure for high-profile sports and engagement among those on- and off-campus with intercollegiate athletics; and
- emphasis on particular sports (some schools have a higher profile in either football or basketball, while others cast a wide shadow in both).

(See Appendix B for further elaboration.)

I visited each campus for between three and five days. On each campus, I interviewed administrators in areas of the university concerned with external constituents:

undergraduate admissions
athletics fundraising
institutional advancement
alumni relations
development
governmental relations
college or school dean
assistant to the president
university president emeritus

I spoke both with administrators at both the university-wide level and at individual colleges, schools, and departments. I also gained insight into enhancing institutional profile from interviews that I did on each campus with numerous faculty and students, as well as with administrators working in student affairs, student life, residence life, cultural affairs, and institutional research.[1] These faculty and students, like the administrators that I interviewed, reflected a range of engagement with and general support of intercollegiate athletics on their campuses. Finally, I made special efforts to include the voices of women and people of color in selecting interview subjects.

I conducted 177 formal interviews, most of which I scheduled before arriving on campus, and which generally lasted one-hour. I also conducted approximately the same number of informal interviews, which lasted anywhere from a few minutes to a half-hour, and were generally with students, faculty, and lower-level staff. Just over one-half of the

[1] In a related paper, I draw more heavily on these interviews and explore the notion that spectator sports embody the popular customs and rituals associated with the collegiate life, serving as a surrogate for the more intimate community-building activities traditionally found on smaller residential campuses.

formal interviews were with administrators concerned with external constituents. I also triangulated my data collection through the extensive use of other data sources on my visits to each campus, primarily through reviewing documents that ranged from promotional materials to internal memoranda, and observing campus life and noting significant physical features on campus.

I analyzed and interpreted the data collected using the constant comparative approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Conrad, 1982; Glazer, 1978; Glazer and Strauss, 1967). After coding the data into as many categories as possible -- each of which represented a different broad concept -- I considered the dimensions of the concepts, their relationships with other concepts, and the conditions under which they are pronounced or minimized. I then compared the overall data with the properties of the categories, continued to analyze and further refine the categories and their relationships, and gradually began to develop "theory" by reducing these to higher-level concepts and propositions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Conrad, 1982; Glazer, 1978; Glazer and Strauss, 1967). I stopped collecting data to generate and substantiate my "theories" when I could find no additional data to embellish them; all of the major concepts and their interrelationships were theoretically saturated (Conrad, 1982).

The categories that I derived conformed to the degree possible with the standard that they be internally consistent (internal convergence) but distinct from one another (external divergence) (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Guba, 1981). I also searched throughout the process for negative instances and rival structures, two other internal checks on my decisions (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). My interpretation of these data reflects the ontological and epistemological assumptions consistent with constructivist inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1995).

The data collection and analysis conformed to the highest standards of qualitative research. Instead of demonstrating constructs appropriate to quantitative research -- reliability, internal validity, external validity -- I rigorously employed a parallel set of standards applicable to qualitative research. Qualitative research establishes the

trustworthiness of its findings by demonstrating that findings are: (1) credible, (2) transferable, (3) dependable, and (4) confirmable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The credibility of a case study "depends on the degree to which it rings true to natives and colleagues in the field" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 21). Credibility is established if participants agree with the constructions and interpretations of the researcher. I used member checking in the form of debriefing sessions with interviewees immediately following interviews to test my initial understanding of the data gathered. I also made follow-up contact with key research participants to test my evolving analytical categories, as well as my interpretations and conclusions (Whitt, 1993). Finally, I triangulated my data sources, using interviews, documentary evidence, and observation.

A case study must be useful in illuminating another context if it is to be deemed transferable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the only way to establish transferability is to create a "thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and . . . the study" (p. 126). I made every effort to provide the thick description necessary for the study to inform theory and practice.

The principal means of establishing dependability and confirmability in a study is through an audit. Dependability involves the reporting of results considering possible changes over time. Confirmability is the concept that the data can be confirmed by someone other than the researcher. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend, I created an audit trail -- one that would allow an external auditor to examine both the processes and products of the study -- in order to ensure dependability and confirmability. The audit trail includes: (1) raw data, including tapes, interview notes, and documents; (2) products of data reduction and analysis, including field notes, interview and document summary forms, and case analysis forms; (3) products of data reconstruction and synthesis, including category descriptions, case reports; and (4) process notes, including notes on methodological decisions and trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Finally, the research method that I selected has two chief advantages in an exploratory study. First, grounded theory lends itself to the development of potential explanations for unaddressed research questions and is conducive to including perspectives outside of the expectations of the researcher. Second, a strength of the approach is reaching what is significant about individual cases and subjects, instead of focusing solely on generalizations. The usual limitations attendant to qualitative and ethnographic research are present here, particularly issues around generalizing broadly from the results of an exploratory study, and incorporating the perspectives of the subject in negotiating meanings and outcomes.

Findings and Interpretations

A high-profile college sports program is perceived by external constituents to be something distinctive, central, and enduring about the institution, as well as something that is viewed favorably by others. Both outcomes enhance institutional identification, causing people to:

- be drawn to campus, both literally and figuratively;
- come to know something about the institution, often something positive; and
- think of the institution in conjunction with the universities against whom the athletics teams commonly compete.

These factors serve the goals of institutional advancement by increasing the level of contact that external constituents have with the institution and motivating them to want to enhance the visibility of their organizational affiliation.

Drawing People to Campus

It is essential for institutions to draw external constituents to campus -- both literally and figuratively -- in order to assemble the resources necessary to survive and prosper. What is difficult is capturing the attention of the right audiences for the right purposes. One particularly effective tool for reaching these audiences is through high-profile intercollegiate athletics. Football and basketball teams garner the positive attention for an institution that

raises its overall profile in the eyes of many relevant constituents. Intercollegiate athletics afford external audiences the opportunity to become directly involved with the institution and provide them with a concrete reason to support it -- even to feel passionate about it. Given the ability of high-profile spectator sports to engage people in institutional life -- supplying them with something that they can champion and with which they can identity -- intercollegiate athletics assume a important position within the overall identity of the institution. On-campus spectator sports serve to connect key external constituencies with "their" university, both physically and emotionally.

The intersections between external relations and intercollegiate athletics become clearer using three institutional functions involving external relations as illustrations: governmental relations, development, and alumni relations. Administrators who work in these areas recognize how important football and basketball games are in drawing people to campus.

At public universities, intercollegiate athletics offer a useful tool in state and governmental relations. Each year, the football game between Michigan State and Michigan offers an opportunity for the administrations at both schools to invite legislators and bureaucrats from the state capital in Lansing to campus (the game is played in alternate years at either school). Once the legislators are on-campus, the universities focus on the messages that they have individually and in conjunction with each other identified as central. These are the ideas that they hope will soon translate into buildings and programs with the requisite state support. At Louisiana State, located only a few miles from Huey Long's state capital tower in Baton Rouge, staff from state agencies responsible for appropriations to the university are regularly invited into one of several enclosed boxes located adjacent to the press box. The games are another work day for university officers, who use the occasion to build relationships with the bureaucrats and drive home the appropriate messages about university initiatives and needs. State legislators also make use of the access provided by the university through Tiger football games tickets, dispensing them to supporters and constituents.

Similarly, campus sporting events augment university fundraising. Like other administrators, development officers are working on game days, building relationships with the potential donors that they are able to attract to campus with the promise of viewing the game from a box while enjoying catered food. Placed strategically in the box are major officers of the university poised to discuss key fundraising and resource needs when the right opportunity presents itself. At UNLV, certain prospective donors are invited aboard airplanes chartered to take teams to away games. Development officers also use away games as an opportunity to mobilize potential donors in those areas, inviting them to games and events surrounding them. The recent Northwestern participation in the Rose Bowl coincided with a blitz of development activity in Southern California.

Alumni associations, where fundraising typically involves more people giving less money, also typically adopt a high profile at football and basketball games. In fact, at some schools, it is difficult to find a well-attended alumni event that is not somehow connected with athletics. The hospitality tents they pitch in parking lots outside of football stadiums represent contact with alumni that is critical in enhancing alumni participation in the life of the university.[2]

Institutions must draw external constituents to campus -- both literally and figuratively -- to ensure their survival and prosparity. Drawing these people *to* campus, makes it more likely that they will be drawn *into* campus, making an eventual successful "ask" -- whether for state appropriations, major gifts, or annual fund contribution -- more likely. Attracting important external constituents to the events surrounding games in the high-profile spectator sports is a key tool -- perhaps *the* key tool at large institutions -- available to university administrators seeking to build relationships with these groups. In

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[2] Even though college sports serve institutional purposes, intercollegiate athletics also serves the athletics department itself. University development and alumni relations teams typically operate in conjunction with fundraising staffs with athletic departments. At Clemson, IPTAY ("I pay ten dollars a year") raises $8 million in annual and major gifts. Unlike their counterparts on the university side, athletic department fundraisers can offer premiums tied to donations. Most high-profile athletic programs develop a point system that rewards longevity as a donor and levels of donation with access to the best tickets and preferred parking. IPTAY, for examples, sells numbered parking spaces outside of Clemson Memorial Stadium, fetching thousands of dollars for the best ones. Clemson also raises significant money through leasing its 99 executive suites at the football stadium.

addition, engagement in campus life can be less direct and yield similarly positive results for the university. Simply following teams and games from afar draws external constituents into university life in a way that enhances institutional identification and facilitates external support..

Positive About the Institution

Spectator sports events not only attract the attention and participation of key external constituents in institutional life, they also cause them to come to consider the university in positive terms. The interests of university faculty and administrators often coincide with enhancing the reputation and profile of the institution. As in business, a positive identity of which people are aware is the pipeline through which resources flow. The basic assumption is that neither legislative appropriation committees, nor tuition-paying parents, nor annual and major donors will want to contribute to an enterprise that is perceived to lack significance. Accordingly, the paramount goal for any university administration is to use the tools available to improve the terms in which people view the institution.

The key external constituencies to whom colleges and universities attempt to spread coherent and positive messages outlining institutional missions and initiatives are sometimes skeptical. Universities operate under norms that are often peculiar to people outside of academe and are not especially accessible to lay audiences. Moreover, specific programs -- research in the humanities, for instance -- that are at the essence of the university can be controversial and are sometimes difficult to explain to external constituencies.

Intercollegiate athletics offer the institutional advancement community the opportunity to use good will generated from something that is institution-wide to sell specific programs and initiative to those who must back them financially. On-campus spectator sports are apparent and accessible -- and are typically popular. Football and basketball teams and games allow advancement officers to portray an often otherwise impersonal -- and sometimes even unpopular -- university with a human face. Spectator sports connect

external constituents to the institution and provide them with a feeling of often intense pride about it.

Among the many illustrations of the role of high-profile spectator sports in enhancing institutional identity, one of the most interesting is role in admissions -- certainly for undergraduates and perhaps even for graduate and professional students -- by bringing institutions to the attention of prospective students. The appeal to prospective students is the collegiate ideal. They are not drawn to an institution through the prospect of participating as student-athletes -- a recruiting devise used commonly and successfully at many smaller institutions -- but through the opportunity of membership within a larger community of loyal fans. Institutions use spectator sports in defining the institution relative to others for prospective students.

College sports is part of what makes a large state university unique and attractive to those enrolling. Mass sporting events also make large, seemingly impersonal universities seem more accessible to potential students. One-third of the photographs in the poster-size viewbook produced for prospective students by the University of Michigan in the past three years involve people watching intercollegiate athletics in some way. Admissions officers at Louisiana State University and Northwestern University reported that applications for undergraduate admissions increased by roughly one-quarter in the year following dramatic positive turnabouts in football. At Northwestern, prospective students from across the country were bombarded with stories in both the sports and regular media that portrayed the school in the most positive way. Northwestern became the model of blending academic rigor, athletic success, and good citizenship, and it has translated into more interest in the school.

Most prospective students likely know something positive about the university outside of intercollegiate athletics. However, high-profile spectator sports may be the only point of reference to the large university for many residents of local communities, taxpayers in a state, and the people in nation-at-large. For example, what do most people across the nation know about the University of Michigan? Perhaps only that the school has enjoyed

some success in football and basketball. Most have little idea about the high ranking of most academic departments on the campus. What is perhaps more interesting is that even in the state of Michigan, citizens may know little more. Similarly, how many people across the country (at least those outside of academe) would have even heard of Duke or Clemson or Tulane were it not for college sports? How many would ever hear anything about the states of Alabama or Nebraska or Utah were it not for the success of the football and basketball teams at their state universities? In contrast, how many people outside academe, even in Chicago, know anything about the University of Chicago, an institution that no longer participates in high-profile intercollegiate sports?

Even for those with simply a passing interest in sports, teams participating in intercollegiate football and basketball at the highest levels become household names. It would be difficult for *any* Nebraskan -- or even most Americans -- not to know something about the recent national champion Cornhusker football teams. They simply receive too much attention in too many places to go unnoticed. Even the person in Omaha who is indifferent to sports probably knows something about the Nebraska teams, given the profile of the team in the state. If the non-sports fan does not hear about the Cornhuskers through happening to notice the sports page or a sportscast, he or she will likely hear about them in reading the front page or viewing the regular newscast, if not in any number of social settings or even at the office. With that kind of pervasive notice, how could the team not become a significant aspect of the identity of the university? The point is underscored by the fact that the academic sides of so many of our large state and private universities look alike to many people, while different college football and basketball teams have unique identities. The academic programs -- an even the physical campus setting -- at the University of Nebraska, Clemson University, and the University of Connecticut are very similar. However, the Cornhuskers, Tigers, and Huskies are distinctive.

Still, even though intercollegiate athletics offer a particularly effective tool for reaching key external audiences audiences, garnering the attention for an institution that raises its overall profile in the eyes of many relevant constituents, college sports may matter to some

very little or not at all. The profile of an institution among academics is likely based more on the productivity of faculty colleagues in a given discipline. Moreover, others may know about sports on a campus, but be able to separate them in their minds from the academic side of the university.

Nevertheless, whether one supports the idea of high-profile intercollegiate athletics, it is difficult to deny that college sports matter greatly in the public life of the university. Football and basketball are a significant aspect in the overall identity of schools that invest heavily in these activities. Perhaps those outside of the traditional university community are less significant in the life of the institution than are those on-campus who contribute to the life of the university more directly. Still, these are the taxpayers to whom public universities must appeal, however indirectly, for support. They are the prospective students or their parents. They are even the potential donors, both major and minor. Consequently, universities quickly recognize the value of imparting their messages externally and come to value the tools that allow for these messages to be heard. The bottom line is that managing institutional identity -- however difficult that may be -- becomes increasingly important in a climate of ever-increasing competition for static resources, and athletics offers a rare tool to enhance profile.

Reference to Other Institutions

Perhaps the greatest constraint for institutional leaders attempting to define an identity is that one likely already exists (and it may well be contrary to the one that they would prefer). A strong institutional identity is something that comes neither quickly or easily, and people routinely perceive a university in ways that are unfair. The institutional reputation and profile that form the foundation of identity typically lag behind actual quality (if that can ever really be measured) for institutions on the rise, and lingers for institutions in decline.

Raising institutional profile is something that does not occur in isolation, but by comparison with peers. Institutions commonly underscore their own excellence by external reference. Colleges and universities seem constantly to be looking for measures that

suggest their status and position within the whole of American higher education. Our largest and most esteemed institutions assess their place though their Association of American Universities membership, Carnegie Endowment classification, or rank on the list of National Science Foundation research grants received. These affiliations and rankings are important.

Apart from these rankings and their geographical location, large universities may have no real identity at all as institutions. Even among those in academe, what differences exist between the Universities of Illinois, Georgia, and Arizona? What we do know about is are groups to which they belong that suggests quality: membership among the 62 AAU schools, a Carnegie Research I classification, or a place in the top 20 of NSF grants received. The visitor to any campus that perceives itself to be on-the-rise will come away with a briefcase full of document highlighting their rising standing on these and other measures. It can be argued that these measures mean very little as actual indicators of quality. What is important is that where a university perceives itself to stand relative to peers is extremely significant in the overall identity of the institution.

There is a strong element of competition involved in one institution comparing itself with others. Schools often square off with each other in attracting people and resources, with one university coming out as winner in what is commonly a zero-sum game. These same universities use athletics as a yardstick in the same way. On the field, success is measured -- in an even more concrete way (and perhaps a more satisfying one) -- in direct comparison with others. There is a clear winner at the end of every game. Similarly, there is no disputing what the standings represent at the end of the season: someone is champion and someone finishes in last place. Achievement has a actual measure in high-profile intercollegiate athletics. Perhaps the absolute measure of institutional prowess at the end of a game or season is part of what makes athletics so compelling in lives universities that seem to be in constant search for indicators of where they stack up. The competition on the field does seem to resemble the competition between institutions in general.

Universities also use their membership in specific athletic conferences as a measure of themselves as institutions. When Florida State, an emerging research university, joined the Atlantic Coast Conference in 1992, it immediately became associated -- both literally and in our minds -- with some of our most prestigious institutions: Duke, Georgia Tech, North Carolina, Virginia. The decision to join the ACC may have been motivated primarily to protect athletic department revenues, but it also had an element of institution building. Joining the ACC may have represented a step down for Florida State football, but it provided the university with an unusual opportunity to step up in institutional prestige.

Colleges and universities have historically used athletics to put themselves "on the map." Institutions like UNLV, founded relatively recently to serve a metropolitan population, stand little chance against State U. or Ivy League U. on traditional measures of academic prestige or campus life. What UNLV has been able to do is match any school in the nation in basketball. Basketball has given the emerging institution an identity both locally and nationally, and building that identity was a conscious decision of the administration. The idea was that a university can build from there. Similarly, Notre Dame is recognized today as our leading Catholic university and one of our finest undergraduate institutions, competing favorable with Duke, Northwestern, and several Ivy League schools in competition for incoming students. It reached that enviable position due to the unique prominence of its football team, as people on campus readily recognize. Under Knute Rockne in the 1920s, the small college gained national prominence in football, becoming the symbol of Catholic immigrants attempting to do the same. Notre Dame football was so successful that it became an icon, and has remained one as the university wisely built on the exposure in ensuing years.

Football and basketball teams that win consistently in competition with teams from other schools may produce a "halo effect" that may cause people to perceive the university as being better than it actually is. Do we think of the University of Nebraska more favorably as an institution because they have been so successful for so long in football? Of course, the perception alone can be a springboard to the university actually improving.

Notre Dame has long had a positive athletics identity that has allowed it to attract students from a deeper applicant pool than a school of its academic reputation would normally be able to do. As a result, the academic reputation of the school has increased as admissions numbers have increased. Equally interesting is whether there is a reverse halo effect. Does the attention that Nebraska receives for its consistently outstanding football team diminish its standing in the eyes of those assessing its academic reputation?

Conclusions and Implications

The halo effect underscores that it is difficult to debate that sports -- not just college sports, but all sports -- are important in society. Because so many people are paying attention, intercollegiate athletics has become an especially important institutional function when schools make a heavy investment in sports. Athletics is a part of the university, however, that has seemingly very little to do with its fundamental purposes. How does football or basketball, when played at the highest level, contribute to research, teaching, and service -- the reasons that society supports universities? The potentially dangerous disconnect alone offers reason to study the connections between athletics and identity at our large universities.

Spectator sports are an image-building tool that must be used cautiously. If all that people know about a university is its teams, then the institution is relying upon something that is by definition inconsistent with its purposes for the consistent support for which it hopes. Therefore, making appropriate connections between athletics and academics becomes critical. It is not only the right thing to do, but is a necessary thing to do. Athletics may get an institution in the door -- like the door-to-door salesperson -- but unless there is something else to sell, the university will go away a failure. No university wants to be known as the type of "football factory" that sacrifices academic integrity for success on the playing field. Those at schools that have had serious problems in their football or basketball programs report that scandals in the athletics department do not necessarily undo strides made in bolstering academic reputation. However, they do suggest that these difficulties represent a serious distraction from the business of building the others aspects of

the university. These troubles can also damage the community-building that is the other basic intra-institutional use for high-profile intercollegiate athletics.

Given the importance college sports assumes in both community-building and raising profile, the potential exists for the messenger itself to become part of the overall message, and perhaps even to overpower it. It can be a tricky proposition to rely upon intercollegiate athletics to tell the story of an institution devoted to activities in classrooms and in laboratories that are far removed from the playing field. For many in society -- including those on whose support public higher education relies -- State U. may primarily embody a team. These same people likely have some sense that State U. is a "good school," but that message rarely comes across as often and clearly as the "good place to be" identity fostered through spectator sports. Institutions run the same risks in using college sports in building campus community. The messenger and the message may be sufficiently inconsistent that the messenger becomes the message, and that is when the scandals so often associated with an imbalance between athletics and academics arise.

The importance we often attach to intercollegiate athletics underscores the limited control that colleges and universities have over how people receive the messages that they attempt to relate, if they receive them at all. What that means is that shaping or reshaping identity is a difficult proposition, even under the best circumstances. The administration at the University of Nebraska may want to talk about the exciting applied research being done in the agricultural engineering department that makes it relevant, or its achievements in minority student recruiting that make it progressive. But many more people are much more interested in Cornhusker football than in these other programs and activities. Similarly, these same messages are often equally difficult to project to groups on campus, as those who attempt organizational change will attest. The best for which most institutions can hope is that people somehow receive their message -- even if it is during the "this is State U." commercial included during half-time of televised games -- and they integrate enough of it to equate the institution with something of value.

Another possible disconnect may lie in traditional rationales offered for intercollegiate athletics versus the reality of college sports on our campuses. Long-standing justifications for high-profile college sports include making much needed money for the university and building character among student-athletes. These stated rationales ring hollow, particularly today. Only a small handful of the schools that support high-profile athletics programs are making more than they contribute in state money or student fees to it. Similarly, the character-building argument may apply to non-revenue or small college intercollegiate sports, but it has little to do with high-profile football and basketball programs at our largest universities. The scandals that seem to dog many of these programs represent but one example of the consequences of the disconnect between athletics and academe. Clearly, the moral victories associated with effort, self-improvement, and sportsmanship that may mark some small college and non-revenue sports have little meaning within the high-stakes worlds of high-profile intercollegiate football and basketball.

Intercollegiate athletics serve important purposes within the university, both in fostering the on-campus community associated with collegiate life, as well as in providing a vehicle to advancing institutional goals to important off-campus constituents. College sports are an significant, but overlooked, aspect of the American university. If we are to understand the places that invest in high-profile athletics programs -- our largest and most important universities --we must appreciate the ways in which intercollegiate athletics coincide with the identities that campuses define for themselves. The utility of athletics in advancing institutional ambitions is undeniable, but there are potential dangers involved when universities define their identities around a construct that is often so far removed from the academic activities rightly at the center of our higher education institutions.

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